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ABSTRACT

A 6-week study on the status of classroom discourse was carried out at St. Norbert College (Wisconsin). Ten tenure-track professors kept notes or journals on their classroom discourse activities for 6 weeks and wrote a scholarly essay on the experience at its conclusion. During the period, they also tried to improve discourse quality in their classes. Each of the 10 expressed similar convictions on the importance of students discovering their own individual voices, rather than passively receiving information. Excerpts from the writings of the 10 participants are offered, featuring agreements and quarrels about the value of discourse, the need for being open and sharing personal knowledge, making subject content "discourse friendly," and grading possibilities. The project resulted in the question, "Is it possible that the best classroom dialogue is driven by excellent in- and out-of-class assignments and projects instead of moment-by-moment direct teaching actions?" Some examples of such work-motivated classroom discourse are given. (JD)

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CLASSROOM DISCOURSE: QUESTIONS, QUARRELS, AND INTROSPECTIONS

In a recently completed manuscript, I wrote, "Here's my conflict! I can't continue depending on pedagogy that I no longer believe in. My identity as expert and truth speaker has become lost." 1 In subsequent paragraphs, I tried to explain the nature of the modest crisis. It centers on the developing conviction that students need to find their own voices. We say the same of writers and revere that idea. Maybe the time for urging real student dialogue in classrooms can finally come into its own.

I've pondered that position for several years and tried to conduct college courses and supervise student teachers as if the vision meant something. But it wasn't until the summer of 1988 that a colleague and I were invited to do a research project on the status of classroom discourse at St. Norbert College.

Our procedure would be humble but earnest. We would invite about twenty tenure-track faculty members to participate by keeping notes or journals on their classroom discourse activities for a six-week period. We would also urged them to try and *improve* the discourse quality in one or more sections. At the end of the six-week period, they would produce brief papers that described their discourse reflections and efforts.

Ten of the twenty colleagues, representing various content disciplines accepted our invitation. 2 They taught, jotted notes, produced scholarly essays of about 1,000 words, and gave them to us for analysis. In November, 1988 we presented results, augmented by additional research in journals and books. A year after, our work was published more officially in our faculty journal, **THE BEACON.** 3

I feel affirmed in my conviction about students needing to discover various individual voices because each of the ten participating colleagues represented similar expressions in their written papers. It's possible that the topic recruited a skewed sample of kindred spirits and that opposing attitudes also exist on campus. Yet our goal was realized in that we wanted to gather further support and ideas from colleagues *who believed in and tried to practice* discourse excellence in their classrooms.

I have strayed even further from traditional lectern totems, continuing to search for ways to turn more idea creation and discussion time over to student groups, trying to help them develop their own resources-*their own voices*-instead of copying mine.

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As a teacher educator, more than college youth are at stake. Observation of student teachers, conferences with cooperating teachers, and workshops with school faculties convince me that high quality discourse in classrooms at all age levels is an endangered species. Recent research practically declares it. But my desire is not to cite research. Mine is a more personal endeavor. I would like to share my reflections about discourse. I will call them *introspections* and assure readers that they are less than certainties. Consider these reflections as questions and quarrels with myself about assisting students in college, secondary, and elementary schools to find their own voices.

WHAT'S SO VIRTUOUS ABOUT DISCOURSE?

A colleague in our study started her paper with reference to a Doonesbury episode where someone says, "It seems as though we are turning out stenographers rather than critical thinkers." (Smith, 1988) 4

What's good about discourse in classrooms is that fewer notes are being scribbled, because students who are speaking and thinking won't be scribbling. Or if a note is scribbled, it's meant to be used for communication instead of memorization. Speaking ideas to others can further bond them to each other and, with worthwhile ideas, that's not a bad outcome. Another virtue can be a more critical scrutiny of what we are thinking because others are less willing to excuse inaccurate information, careless inferences, and lazy logic that we allow ourselves. Experience eventually teaches this to most adults, but shouldn't authentic discourse practice in elementary and secondary classrooms compact and intensify that thinking and learning experience for youth? Must we wait for some indeterminate force called *experience* to leisurely shape thinking and articulation skills of youth?

Humanistic educators make persuasive arguments about the need to stop the one-directional talk in classrooms. Being an expert or truth speaker doesn't insure that truth will be internalized by listeners or note-takers. How can we help students to begin discovering facts and concepts as dynamic sources of personal meaning? Where we fail as educators is not in the quality of our oral telling; we do that so frequently that the repetitions ought to make us very adept a it. But failure nests in the quantity of our adult centered one-directional talk to students and our aversion to breaking that addiction.

I'm frequently nagged by a discourse conscience that jumps around like an imp in my head whispering, *"Let it come from the students... Find the question, the pause, the cue that will make it come from the students!"* We don't stake out consequential

idea territory by jotting frantic notes or drawing in books with various colored markers. Discourse in classrooms is a virtue because speaking ideas, listening to others, and evaluating expressed messages informs social and artistic intelligence and moves us toward cooperation and away from isolation.

At the conclusion of her paper, my colleague describes her efforts as having taken the pencils out of the hands of her students, but "with mixed results." (Smith, 1988,) 5 It hasn't been easy, but she resolves to pursue her experiment and search for discourse inspirations. "Surely the alternative, a generation of stenographers, make the effort worthwhile."

OPEN KNOWLEDGE AND PERSONAL VOICES:

Having good knowledge or even instincts about when discourse isn't happening may be worth as much as careful definitions about what it is. I know that discourse is not occurring when students seem to be reciting finished knowledge. When I sense that, the artistic part of me will try to quickly seek an open-knowledge gate in the content. I want to shift to an area that is more interpretive than finished. Pitching finished knowledge at students can puke on good student interaction very quickly. The question we need to remember frequently is *what can we quarrel about?* When we begin to respectfully accept *and reject* the ideas of others, We know we've ventured from closed to open knowledge territory.

Discourse is occurring when student responses are spontaneous, thoughtful, and honest. We're in the right frame when exchanges on a topic continue, expand, and pull more participants into the dialogue. It is occurring when students change their opinions, or back away from a prior certainty with comments like, "I'm really not sure now." It's certainly happening when we perceive flashes of student conviction, unexpected, but appreciated, and hear ourselves saying something like, "I think you're convincing me."

Newmann(1988) provides an impressive description of classroom discourse when he portrays it as an ascent by students and teachers beyond dependence on knowledge from expert sources. For Newmann, discourse is occurring when participants begin to find their own voices and produce their own language. 6

BUT MY CONTENT ISN'T DISCOURSE FRIENDLY!

I've encountered that response among campus colleagues and from teachers at workshops. It may be offered in a respectful or even hail-fellow-well-met manner, but with the implicit proviso that certain content-*my content*-doesn't accommodate itself to

interpersonal techniques. In fact I suspect that all of us will tend to quarantine certain content areas from discourse efforts. Well meant excuses are offered. This is new material... This is abstract material... This is confusing material... And so the apologies for one-directional teaching nourish themselves.

But a participant in our faculty study offered an interesting counterpoint in the paper she submitted. She wrote that the accounting and statistics she taught might not lend themselves well to group discussion, but then added, "However I do feel it is important that students be actively engaged in learning during the class." 7 As I pondered that proactive response, the real nature of it finally occurred. She was resolving that her content, which might seem to favor lecture and recitation would not dictate that decision.

In recent workshops, I've tried to convince skeptical teachers that the decision to initiate interpersonal energies is more attitudinal than content determined. This conviction was further advanced very recently when I came upon a novel titled, **DREAM SCIENCE**, written by Thomas Palmer. In it, one of the characters says, "The thing to remember is that your mind is in charge now. It dictates. Any life you can imagine is the life you can live." 8

Knowing this doesn't provide the genie. Attitudes die hard. When a colleague declares that certain content is discourse proof, I know that I'm again in the ring with a big mean heavyweight, yet I don't feel helpless. At least one can make an intelligent response... If you cannot see that what you teach might be discourse friendly, then how can I help you? Can I convince you that such an attitude is your loss? I know others who teach your content well and accommodate discourse while doing it. The thing to remember is that *your mind* is in charge now...

TOO DIFFICULT AND TIME CONSUMING!

Establishing discourse in classrooms can't be plea-bargained. Teaching as a social engagement with ideas requires *more tiime and effort* than trying to do it as an expert and truth-speaker

A colleague addresses discourse effort in comments about student note-taking. They "...do not like the perceived lack of structure. They are used to being told exactly what to do and how to do it." (Smith, 1988) 9 To reduce that frustration, she meets frequently with individual students "...to reinforce their observations and encourage them in their efforts ." But that

requires time early in the morning or after class...our own time, we might protest.

Another colleague described his use of panels *"as very serious events."* (Connor, 1988). He insists that presenters plan and rehearse their roles prior to the presentations. It means a hard-work commitment by students ... and teachers.

"The panel presentation is an ambitious project needing careful supervision. I normally have students submit a drafted outline well in advance. Together we work out a suitable approach. I sometimes give the students opportunity to do a dress rehearsal in my office. Generally speaking, I provide whatever assistance I feel is necessary."(Connor, 1988) 10

Reflect on how this short account suggests needed teacher time and effort. "...an ambitious project *needing careful supervision."* or "...students submit a carefully drafted outline *in advance."* or "*Together we work out* a suitable approach..." or "a dress rehearsal *in my office."* or "I provide *whatever assistance* I feel is necessary."

Frequent and high quality classroom discourse doesn't spontaneously occur. Suitable issues need selection. Various challenging questions need extra consideration. Teachers may require students to submit composed questions in advance. Teacher attention to them, and sometimes written comments, do not happen magically. Essay tests should probably be given to students who are developing sophisticated discourse skills. When those examinations are read and scored, whose time and effort are required? These ideas aren't about finding classroom dialogue short-cuts. More and better classroom discourse doesn't come on the cheap.

BUT YOU CAN'T SCORE DISCOURSE!

I have a personal conviction that what can be comfortably scored in education is the most concrete and least thought provoking content. Yet, contrary to this philosophy, I do use a rating scale format to score panel presentations. The scale range(created by myself and a class of students) is a 1 to 5 ranking of panel performance on eight qualitative standards shared with the entire class prior to the first presentation. The eight standards are:

1) Oral Introduction and Focus Clarity,

2) Oral Volume and Sustained Use of Good Language,

3) Panel Scholarship(reference citation),

4) Organization(group planning of ideas is apparent),

5) Content Depth(idea exploration and analysis is apparent),

6) Effective Communication(teaching) is modeled,

7) Overall Evaluation(total impression of presentation),

8) Presented on Due Date(if late, only a score of 1 or 2).

Students who select a panel presentation have done so as an option to a more conventional research paper or some other individually produced assignment. My defense of this panel option is grounded in a belief that reading research, cooperative planning, and final presentation require intellectual efforts that are as consequential and in-depth as any that may be demanded by more traditional and solitary assignments.

Available course time only accommodates three panels per semester which means that if more than three groups submit proposal abstracts, a competitive process is initiated. To choose the three panels, I ask for a volunteer group of six or seven students from the class who are not involved in any of the submitted proposals. After the proposal deadline, we meet in my office and select the three best proposals in committee fashion. On the day of panel presentation, the student evaluators rate the presentation along with myself. One final grade for the panel presentation is a composite of those ratings and is accepted by all three of the panel members. Trying to score each panel presenter individually would seriously compromise the cohesion of those members and also the personal conviction that outcomes of cooperation should be mutually shared.

I don't recommend scoring individuals during large group discussions, but I know that some colleagues do make such attempts. Smith(1988) holds students accountable for planning and carefully *composing questions in advance* of large group discussions. Rather than rating spontaneous oral reactions, she rates the composed questions that students periodically submit to her.

"This year I will require each student to submit a discussion question for each assigned reading. These

> written questions, along with student attendance records, provide objective information to use when assigning a discussion participation grade, usually the most subjective grade I give." (Smith, 1988) 11

To score or not to score various kinds of classroom discourse...that is the question... The issue needs further elaboration and collaboration. I've considered various grading options for classroom discourse in recent years and quarreled with each of them. I'm ambivalent about this area... or is it rather being open-minded.

HELP! I NEED A TAXONOMY!

I'm uncertain about how effective thought and question systems are for solid classroom discourse. Does classification of questions carry over into real dialogues? Before, during or after a good discussion, how important is it to be able to identify the nature of questions according to locations and priorities in a scholar's taxonomy?

One of the participants in our campus research recommended use of taxonomies to improve discourse quality(Murnane, 1988).

> "Ask questions about readings based on Sander's types of classroom questions: memory, translation, interpretation, application, analysis, synthesis, and evaluation. It not only generates good discussion, but students analyze the instructor's questions to verify that questions represent a particular kind." 12

I'm skeptical about the value of taxonomies to teachers in classrooms. Aren't such systems the hybrid creations of academicians? Have thinking and communication codifications come from classroom teachers? I don't think so, though we recipients of taxonomy conditioning aren't blameless. Look how easily we've allowed the various fruits of *experts* to become inserted into our teaching lives! Sometimes I wonder what excellent teaching was like before taxonomies? Where is the research to convince us that students and teachers think better because we taxonomize our goals? Weren't people asking good questions and mentally challenging each other before Bloom, Sanders, and Flanders? Yet my doubts are relentlessly countered by various clinicians of planning precision.

> "You should know exactly what questions, word for word, you are going to use... and perhaps even whom you are going to ask... Build your question outline as many layers deep as your content outline... I would suggest a syllabus for a discussion course that errs on the side of complexity and length (Welty, 1988). 13

Plan the daylights out of our motions, our appearance, our messages, and our lives; and that seems to go for every nuance of teaching! Am I too cranky about this? Would a therapist take me back to my student teaching year and diagnose my position as negative reaction to an anal retentive college supervisor? Back then I remember struggling with his opprobrium for not using state-of-the-art lesson and discussion paradigms. I also acknowledge a certain truth about his critiques. I needed to plan more effectively.

But now I'm quarreling more insistently than ever that we have submerged larger and more inspiring realities of thought and discourse into suffocating lists of inert and in-house academic jargon. Isn't good and serious conversation alive and well beyond formal classroom walls? Isn't the essence of discourse a social, affective, and artistic process? Does anyone outside of teacher education stop a discussion and demand that someone... "Classify that last question, please."

Am I being a bad lad? Am I defying my professional superiors again when I occasionally suggest that recourse to an expert's taxonomy is often a dangerous snake-oil medicine that afflicts rather than assists well-meaning teachers?

FINAL COMMENTS, BUT NO CERTAINTIES:

Our modest study of discourse efforts on the St. Norbert College campus yielded an array of discoveries beyond our expectations. Reading research for the study will continue to enrich our knowledge and efforts extended to classroom discourse. Some of the research touts an array of behavior tactics that shouldn't be too quickly dismissed. A few of the worthier ones merit brief review:

1) Work hard at sustaining a discourse friendly climate.

2) Be mobile, gain and maintain eye contact.

3) Select the right kind of readings and topics-those that appeal to partially formed, yet not rigidly completed student perceptions.

4) Motivate panels and allow students to participate in panel evaluations.

5) Project enthusiasm and energy, speaking with confidence to express convictions as well as attitude openness.

6) Be available to students at times other than formal class hours to sustain conversation and topic commitment.

7) Listen carefully and work to improve the listening attitudes, skills, and readiness among students.

8) Develop and practice various oral response tactics meant to increase and extend student interactions beyond single phrases and sentences(Dillon, 1984). 14

9) Utilize AV and other support technologies.

10) Monitor voice volume, inflections, and other vocal tactics. The most ambitious summary of organized vocal tactics encountered in recent years appears in Idea Paper No. 15(Cashin and McKnight, 1986). 15 This hefty but very readable publication describes eighteen major discourse tactics...and those are segmented into thirty-five discrete oral tactics, classified as cognitive, affective, or participative. There is food for reflection in such a comprehensive array, though readers may recall my earlier hesitations about such highly organized approaches and I congratulate that awareness.

Though I recommend use of various discourse tactics, I do so with the qualification that such arrays will never be complete and that their buffet table character shouldn't make caring motivators of classroom interaction too comfortable. I believe that serious discourse can be encouraged with use of external tactics, but too much reliance on teaching style and technique conjures up images of teacher magicians or sharpies in charge of a prolix array of sly communication tricks and props to get and keep the students going. There is discourse life beyond eye-contact, wait-time, and other teaching tactics. Consider another vision of effective classroom interaction...

> "...or the creation of a true discussion group, that is, a group where the students listen to and speak with one another, where every utterance *is not mediated by the teacher*(Comber, Zeiderman, and Maistrellis, 1989). 16

Maybe consideration of classroom discourse as a product of student work efforts, instead of teacher controlled tactics, should be envisioned. Is it possible that the best classroom dialogue is driven by excellent in and out-of-class assignments and projects instead of moment-by moment direct teaching actions? A few examples of work-motivated classroom discourse are:

1) panels, skits, and role-play episodes planned and produced by students and groups.

2) simulations and models of ideas and issues.

3) student evaluators of other student work. This is not always comfortable, partly because the tradition is for teachers to evaluate students. But traditions can be expanded.

4) journals or diaries that follow certain objective guidelines can be maintained for extended periods with occasional class time devoted to oral reading and discussion.

5) the production of portfolios where a single student or small groups discuss and assemble samples of good work accomplished over a period of time, then submit it to other groups or to the teacher for positive evaluation.

6) survey forms devised by students intending to gather information and develop knowledge from analysis and synthesis.

The above examples and many other possibilities engage students in *spontaneous and consequential discourse* with or without the presence of teachers and tactics. The term "exemplary tasks" occurs in that such extended activities go beyond the conventional work of classroom desks and forty-five minute periods. Such work embodies "...standards of performance that typically face writers, business persons, scientists, community leaders, designers, or historians." 17 And such exemplary tasks are fertile opportunities for dynamic discourse energies within or beyond the margins of teachers, classrooms, and school traditions.

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